



A DIALOGUE BETWEEN ETHNOGRAPHY AND AUTOBIOGRAPHY

Tahiba Banu

Assistant Professor (Ad-Hoc), Lady Shri Ram College for Women, University of Delhi

ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the theoretical debates around the questions 'Who speaks of whom and about whom and how?' This is a vital question to ask of all ethnographic and autobiographical writings. This paper will explore what we see when we compare the two kinds of writing. Are Dalit autobiographies (usually) not about an individual self but about a community, in much the same way that ethnographic writing is also supposed to be about a community? What does a comparison of Dalits autobiographies and ethnographic writings on Dalits tell us about questions of representation and self representation? Does it make a difference if the ethnographer is Dalit? What are the issues involved?

KEYWORDS: Dalits, Autobiography, Ethnography, representation, Power, Theory

The self's engagement in fieldwork could not be naturally suppressed, but had to be self-consciously worked at. The autobiographical mode was highly controlled within mainstream ethnographies. But the self would leak out; in the oral culture of the academy, secret diaries, transformed as fiction or split into separate and hitherto marginalized accounts. (Judith Okely 1992: 9)

Abstraction is an inescapable analytical device that makes knowledge practices possible in the first place; without strategies of abstraction, the infinity of reality would overwhelm us. Yet abstraction is never innocent of power - the precise strategies and methods of abstraction in each instance decide what aspects of a limitless reality are brought into sharp focus and what is left literally out of the picture. (Sankaran Krishna 2006: 90)

In a review of Srinivas' *Caste in Modern India*, Leach called his Sanskritisation model "brahminocentric" and taunted him whether his interpretation would have been different if he were a Sudra [Srinivas 1992: 148]. The incitement of Edmund Leach prompted Srinivas to concede his own caste identity. He wrote "...my stressing of the importance of the Backward Classes Movement, and of the role of caste in politics and administration, are very probably the result of my being a South Indian, and a Brahmin at that. The principle of caste quotas for appointments to posts in the administration, and for admissions to scientific and technological courses, produced much bitterness among Mysore Brahmins. Some of these were my friends and relatives, and I could not help being sensitive to their distress (ibid: 152). (M.S.S Pandian 2008: 39)

The posthumous publications of the Malinowski Diaries in 1967 surprised and shocked anthropologists, and especially Malinowski's followers. The emergence of politics and the writings of the subalterns affected and challenged the earlier writings on caste. Each of the above epigraphs hints towards the politics and the poetics of representations of the other. This paper discusses the theoretical debates around the questions 'Who speaks of whom and about whom and how?' This is a vital question to ask of all ethnographic and autobiographical writings. This paper will explore what we see when we compare the two kinds of writing. Are Dalit autobiographies (usually) not about an individual self but about a community, in much the same way that ethnographic writing is also supposed to be about a community? What does a comparison of Dalits autobiographies and ethnographic writings on Dalits tell us about questions of representation and self representation? Does it make a difference if the ethnographer is Dalit? What are the issues involved?

A comparison between the ethnographies and autobiographies brings up many questions- about the self/other, subjectivities/objectivities, and politics of representation, hegemony of the dominant theories, concepts and perspectives, and also the role of experience in theory. The comparison brings into question the objectivity and authorial neutrality of the researcher or the ethnographer. It draws attention to the relations of power, ethics and politics and hegemony of the ideas of ruling class, upper castes, upper class as well as men. In a sense, the production of knowledge about the other is a process in which the self of the ethnographer is also involved. Ethnographies are not just about the other, they are also about the gaze that sees. The ethnographer's personal history as well as disciplinary and socio-cultural circumstances has a profound effect on the topic chosen and the people selected for study (Davis 1999). It also has an effect on the analysis as well as the knowledge and theories produced. The knowledge produced about

the other gets tightened into concepts and categories of the hegemonic discourses of liberal as well as Marxist perspectives (Guru, 2002). D.R. Nagaraj in his book *The Flaming Feet and Other essays: A Study of the Dalit Movement in India* (2010) points out that the history of caste studies in social sciences belong to two philosophical schools: the integrationists, who emphasize the organic and consensual links of Dalits with caste Hindu society; and the exclusivists, who focus attention on the independent cultural universe of Dalits.

Study of Self and Other

In terms of portraying reality, autobiography and ethnography come across as different forms of writing doing the same thing. Both are associated with the production of knowledge about the social reality. But autobiography is considered as an individualized expression of one's own life, ethnography is about studying the other in terms of community. The latter is a well established discipline which is not dependent on the individualized narrative of a single life. Autobiography is literally writing about the self, while ethnography is writing about the other.

Autobiographies generally are seen as purely subjective and personal, ethnography on the other hand is seen as being objective and public. Both genres are seen as opposites in the binary form of private/public, subjective/objective and self/other. Not just that, autobiographies are seen as empirical as against the theoretical possibilities in ethnography. These binaries assigned to autobiographies and ethnographies privilege one genre of writing over the other, often treating autobiographies as no more than the self expression of one's own life that is not necessarily of any sociological relevance. On the other side ethnographies are treated as relevant as well as more authentic sources of knowledge that is objective and sometimes almost universal.

In both autobiography and ethnography, the self of the author has been seen in uncritical ways. Though autobiography places the self at the center; it is not just about the self, as the self is embedded in society. But Dalit autobiographies distinguish themselves from other writings in the same genre because they do not represent the life of an individual but are the "collective consciousness of a community" (Bhongle 2002: 160). Therefore, they have great relevance for the contemporary cultural context. On the other hand, though ethnography places the other at the centre, the self of the ethnographer is closely embedded in writing about the other. Both the self at the center and the embedded self studying the other are involved in the production of knowledge.

Autobiography in itself is not just about the individual. It may be narrow in its scope, and it may also be completely biased from the point of view of the individual as a successful person. But in this context also there is no need to reduce the genre into some narcissistic endeavor. As Liz Stanley argues it is not necessary to:

Individualise or de-socialise, 'the individual' in the autobiography because from one person we can recover social process and social structure, networks, social change and so forth, for people are located in a social and cultural environment which constructs and shapes not only what we see but also how we see it (Stanley 1993: 45).

This way of extracting the social structure from the autobiography of a privileged individual will exclude the marginalized section of society, because a privileged person is unable to represent them. The upper castes/upper class/men/western/white men will not be able to show the full reality of society

until it is complemented by the writings of the lower castes/lower class/women/non-western/black people.

In terms of ethnography the reflexive turn in ethnography of the 1980s affected social anthropology and one of its main methods-ethnography. Prior to this, researchers were more or less unaware of the impact that their presence in the field had on research findings. The various background conditions which led to the study were not reflected upon. The reflexive turn has led to careful thinking about the means and relations of production of ethnography- the conditions in which it was written, by whom, and the impact of these on the content of the ethnography produced. In other words, this led to the development of a more self-critical form of ethnography. Reflexive ethnography became one of the outcomes of the postmodern critique of ethnography. Thus, reflexive ethnography meant recognition of the theoretical and methodological paradigms of the researcher, as well as the dynamics of the research process itself. As a result, researchers in the process of writing the final text started including autobiographical accounts of their own theoretical orientations, the relations and closeness with the subjects or informants, and the wider structure of the production of the research itself, such as financing institutions and affiliations to other institutions. This led to a change in writing ethnographic texts which became more self critical and experimental. Charlotte Aull Davies in her book *Reflexive Ethnography: A Guide to Researching Selves and Others* (1999) discusses how the ethnographer's personal history as well as their disciplinary and socio-cultural locations have an effect on the topic they choose and the people they select to study. It also has an effect on the analysis as well as the production of knowledge and theories. Knowledge is constituted in ways which reflect power relations and the relationship between politics and research. For example, feminist standpoint theory questions the construction of knowledge and theory of the world where women's realities are not taken into consideration or are not accommodated. Davies argues that such critiques from the feminist standpoint or any other standpoint bring awareness of the situation where the "dominant perspective remains completely unaware of the other and in fact imagines itself to be universal and absolute truth" (Davis 1999: 62). Thus Knowledge differs methodically according to the social position of its producer. Therefore 'difference' must be given epistemological relevance in research rather than seeking to erode such difference.

In her sociological analysis of autobiographies and biographies Liz Stanley (1993) argues that each sociologist should analytically account for their intellectual products by investigating the material grounds of their own labour processes, recognizing that knowledge is contextual and situational and differs systematically in relation to the social location of its producers.

Issues in the Representation of Dalits and Theorization of Caste

The emergence of Dalit autobiography (more generally, Dalit Literature) is closely related to the issue of representation, and explicitly raised the issue of representation. However, it is not primarily about only Dalit representing Dalits, nor does it claim that only Dalits can represent Dalits. It is more concerned about the invisibility and misrepresentation of Dalit reality by non-Dalit writers in the field of literature and social sciences. The second issue is about presenting a counter or alternative view of the Dalit world in the cultural, social and economic domains.

The issue of misrepresentation and invisibility was not questioned in literature or social sciences until Dalits began to challenge the hegemonic practices of literature as well as the social sciences. It was the coming of Dalit politics which impacted the writings on Dalit and caste. For example, the coming of Dalit literature challenged the way Dalits have been seen or the village has been seen or the way caste has been conceptualized within Indian society. It is important that communist parties, who saw the society from the Marxian perspective, have also ignored the reality of caste. Though they talked about the masses and the people, they were unaware of the importance of caste or its reality.

Misrepresentation in Literature

There is an argument from Dalit critics like Baburao Bagul, Omrakash Valmiki and others that Indian literature is an elite, Hindu and upper caste field in which there is a biased representation of the Dalits and lower castes. The upper caste Hindus were more interested in writing or portraying their colonized identity as Indians against the British colonizer. The contradictions inside the Indian society didn't make any inroads in their writings.

The principles themes of this Indian Literature were anti colonial consciousness, tensions between tradition and modernity, the Indian struggle for Independence, the glory of civilization and so on (Satyanarayana & Tharu 2013).

Prominent writers all belonged to the upper castes, and they dominated the discourse on literature until Dalit literature emerged assertively. But for Ambedkar or Phule the Indian reality has a different connotation. Ambedkar argued that social equality among Indians was as important as Independence, and treating unequals as equals only increased inequality. But he was not given importance and was hugely criticized on the ground that his views will divide Indians and so forth. The consciousness of the Indian freedom movement and its leaders has represented the consciousness of the upper-caste Hindus, which was also the subject of Indian literature. The Dalit critique calls Indian literature as Hindu Literature.

For instance, Sarah Beth Hunt in her book *Hindi Dalit Literature and the Politics*

of Representation (2014) says that Dalit writers have argued that the domination of cultural representations of Indian society is "cloaked in the guise of the universal norm and it in fact reveals a specifically upper caste perspective which is neither representative nor benign" (Hunt 2014: 2). She argues that Dalit autobiographies have 're-narrated Dalit characters' which were represented by the mainstream Hindi literature in terms of impurity, social inferiority, helpless victimhood and exploited labour (Hunt 2014: 177).

For the writers of "Hindu" literature Dalits were not part of their imagination. Even the novels of the progressive writers have been criticized for the wrong depiction of the Dalits in their writings, such as Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable* (1935) and Premchand's *Rangbhoomi* (1925).

In *Untouchable Fictions: Literary Realism and the Crisis of Caste* (2013), Toral Jatin Gajjarawala sees Dalit textuality in opposition to certain bodies of literature, which largely include Premchand's social realism and fictions of social reform; literary modernism and its construction of the universal; and rural realism and village literature. She argues that Dalit textuality moves beyond sociological questions of mimesis or influence and it rewrites, and rereads, a canon of logic on caste questions, arguing, in fact, that a certain relationship to caste was required for fiction to be fiction and realism to be realism. She says that Dalit textuality's real contributions include the provision for a Dalit analytics, a revisionist critique of the canon, and a critique of the hegemony of Brahminical culture in the broadest sense.

In his essay 'The Dalit Reconfiguration of Modernity: Citizens and Castes in the Telugu Public Sphere'(2016), K. Satyanarayana brings out the importance of the Dalit critique of the public and political sphere in the form of Dalit writings and Dalit movement, which was not there until Dalits themselves started to engage in self-representation. Dalit writings highlight the critique of Telugu literature as a bourgeois and elite domain which sets standards for writing and their limitations. He says that with the emergence of Dalit writings into literature, the public sphere has broadened, and it has redefined the notion of "literature". He says:

Literature is no longer a domain of special knowledge. The notion of the "poet or critic" as a privileged person, gifted with powers of imagination and trained in the skills of analysis, was thoroughly discredited (Rawat and Satyanarayana 2016: 158).

It advanced a critique of the human citizen (read: Hindu, upper caste, and male), a figure of the modernist project of Telugu modern literature, and posited the not-quite- citizen figure of the Dalit to reconfigure the Telugu public sphere. Dalit claims to self-representation in the Telugu public sphere cannot be read just as claims of producing authentic literature. These are claims specifically made for recognition in the public domain as poets, writers, scholars, and critics. Reading discourses such as Dalitvadam and Dalit literature as pure literature or culture and justifying this body of writing on the ground of authenticity will obscure the new politics of caste or recognition and the refiguring of the Telugu public sphere.

Misrepresentation of Dalits in Social Sciences

In social anthropology and sociology the earlier work on caste has been criticized on many grounds. For example:

- Earlier work ignored Dalit life- experience and perspectives in the social sciences which resulted in a theorization of caste from Brahmanical ideology.
- It also presented Dalits as mute, with no agency or viewpoint, and in conformity with the caste system and the ideology of Brahminical scriptures which sustains it.
- Dalits have been misrepresented in many works even if their life has been taken into account (Rege 2006; Judge 2014).

It is not that Dalit politics and Dalit literature of the 1970's and 1980's poses a critique only of the mainstream literature, or mainstream politics but it also impacted the social science disciplines, and their theorization of caste and Indian society. As P.A. Adler and P. Adler (2008) note in 'Of Rhetoric and Representation: The Four Faces of Ethnography' (2008):

As an outgrowth of the merging of the humanities and the social sciences, the practice of identifying tropes within sociological genres grew in the 1980s. Influenced by literary criticism, ethnographers, in particular, became involved in a reflexive movement, directing their gaze at the process of how they construct and analyze their texts. This has been called the "linguistic turn" in ethnography (Adler and Adler 2008: 1).

In an article 'Writing Birthright: On Native Anthropologists and the Politics of Representation' (1997), Pnina Motzafi-Haller answers two sets of questions. One has to do with her position as a native author and the second has to do with the search for sensitive tools and concepts that enable the native author to grasp and describe with accuracy and subtlety a complex historical reality from the perspective of the powerless. In representing her own community she says:

My identity as a Mirzahi woman has propelled me, in torturous and far from direct ways, as the life story presented above shows, to return again and

again to the study of power and the workings of hegemony. It pushed me to examine these questions from a deeply committed position and forced me to face such questions both on level of the actual fieldwork experience and from the intimately connected analytical and theoretical implications of the work (Motzafi-Haller 1997: 216).

Debates in India

Until recently, ethnographies in India have not dealt with questions of reflexivity and the power and hegemony of ruling ideas. Two dominant positions have structured the sociological tradition in India. One is colonialism and its practices, and the other is the ideologies of nationalism and notions of nationhood (Patel 2011: xii). Sujata Patel also argues that the discipline of anthropology since the late 19th century legitimized a colonial frame of reference for examining and evaluating communities and thus “became a powerful instrument and tool of understanding contemporary sociabilities” (2011: xvii).

In the 1950s or 1960s the structural-functional method emerged as a distinct theoretical line in the analysis of fieldwork based material about single castes and villages (Mohanty 2012: xxxvii). A series of village monographs was published in the 1950's, for example S.C Dube's *Indian Village*, M.N. Srinivas's *Indian Villages*, D.N Majumdar's *Rural Profiles* and McKim Marriott's *Village India* all around 1955. Later other village studies were published such as Bailey (1957), Dube (1958), Mayer (1960) and Beteille (1965) and Oommen (1970). Caste emerged as the core area of sociological research as it was considered the central and defining feature of Indian society (Mohanty 2012: xxxvii).

Critiques from the Dalit and feminist standpoints have affected the way ethnographic work has been produced, and today ethnography has acknowledged the power dimension in the relationship between the insider and the outsider, and the politics involved in the construction of knowledge about the other. It was the impact of colonialism as well as the dominant perspective which impacted the ethnographic studies of caste communities.

Peter Burger (2012) in his article 'Theory and ethnography in the modern anthropology of India' discusses the general perspectives by which anthropologists analyzed and interpreted Indian culture and society. M.N Srinivas in his book *Village India* described the village as “a well defined structural entity” (1955: 1) and shows how local castes are separated by rules of commensality, though they were interdependent because of patron-client relationships and occupational specialization. According to him “the dominant caste fulfills a unifying function for the village as a whole”. The functionalist perspective on village life does not hold when it is studied through the Dalit perspective or the subaltern perspective. The same perspective starts to unravel or look biased when seen from the viewpoints of power and dominance. Katherine Gough's study of a south Indian village, presented village life as being marked by Brahmanical dominance and inter and intra caste rivalries (Gough 1955: 51).

Sujata Patel argues that the functionalist paradigm made an epistemic distinction between subject and object, and suggested that the subject, a researcher/social scientist, should distance himself from the object she/he observed. Patel says that this kind of distancing only “mirrors the subject's ideology” (2011: 83) and produced ethnography that was “upper castes in its orientation” (Rege 2011: 221). It has produced caste in Indian society “as a kind of adjustment mechanism” and “produced work in terms of the theory of linear transition towards progressive changes”. Rege argues that in Srinivas's history of Westernization, the “source of the modern is never the lower castes” (Rege 2011: 221). Thus caste as the other of the modern can only belong to the upper castes (Pandian 2008:1730; Rege 2011: 221). M.S.S Pandian also critiques M.N Srinivas theory of caste, sanskritization and westernization from the perspective of Dalit autobiographical texts. He argues that because of its own rules of objectivity and authorial neutrality, social sciences failed to produce a morally and politically enabling knowledge. He points out “how acts of theorizing in the domain of social sciences are inevitably acts of multiple distancing”. The teleological moves from lower caste practices to sanskritisation to westernization sets caste as the other of the modern, it thus locates the time of caste in the past. It portrays caste as a “residue or a leftover that will disappear as time marches on”.

K Lakshmanan in 'Dalit Masculinities in Social Science Research: Revisiting a Tamil Village' (2004) questions the work of non-Dalit scholars in ignoring the social reality in the field. Their generalizations on the lives of others clearly indicate their highly prejudiced mindset. He notes that:

Social scientists in India freely borrow western theories, concepts and categories and apply them without conceptualizing it into the Indian social context. Particularly, when non-Dalits articulate Dalits' cultural milieu and their social spheres, they expose their subjective notions. They have not adequately theorized existing realities of Indian politics, culture and history. Even if there were any attempts, they were polemical and clearly exposed binary notions and to some extent, prejudices” (Lakshmanan 2004: 1088).

He further notes

Social science researchers should ponder over the pitfalls of generalization of the particular or deliberate negation of the universal. This double-edged

weapon may lead to unwarranted conclusions. Exceptions are there in any social group. But, making a selective portrayal of them as the prevailing reality clearly indicates a highly prejudiced mindset (2004: 1088).

Gopal Guru poses various objections to the social theorists and social sciences in his article 'Egalitarianism and the Social Sciences in India' (2012). When non-Dalits represent the Dalits in social sciences, he argues they produce reverse orientalism in a very subtle way, and that involves a charity element in the form of Jajmani relations which is condescending, and which has various implications. First, it constitutes a Jajmani relationship between the two, through the “Brahminical mechanism of first controlling knowledge resources and then pouring them into empty cupped palms of Dalits”. This results in the involvement of the patron/self of the non-Dalit theorists which has an “existence in both the Dalit soul and Dalit society”. It highlights the fact that social sciences and social enquiry evade the rules of being objective and being based on authorial neutrality. Second, he argues that the representation and the theories they produce tend to undervalue the discursive capacity of such groups, who in favorable hermeneutic (or interpretative) conditions can develop an 'epistemic stamina'. He says that non-Dalits use the details offered by Dalits for either building grand formulations in a liberal mode or its postmodernist deconstruction, which in the end remains blind to hegemonic politics. This is done while standing outside the Dalit experience. This Guru says 'restricts the Dalits to the empirical and pushes them into the frozen 'essentialist trap'. Third, he says that this Dalit representation and Dalit epistemological standpoint produced by non-Dalits give more importance to these non-Dalit writers. Guru Calls this representation epistemologically posterior, which fails to belong to 'the realm of social necessity' and does not take into account several local experiences. For example Marxist discourse introduces concepts like class, proletariat, labor and the liberal discourses introduces concepts like caste, nationalism, multiculturalism, citizenship and rights. In this way liberal and Marxist discourses try/tried to tighten the conceptual boundaries of social sciences in India almost pushing the social science disciplines into a state of suffocation.

Guru raises objections to the non-Dalits doing theory and research about Dalits, he asks Dalits to do theory which should come out of the limitations of the Marxist and liberal framework, because of the ownership of Dalit experience by Dalits. In that process of doing theory, Dalits should develop the freedom to move in and move out of the Dalit experience to build theoretical insights from a distance.

What Dalit autobiographies do?

Autobiography means an account of a person's life written by herself/himself. Autobiography speaks not only about the writers and incidents but also about their experiences. Roy Pascals (1960) in his book *Design and Truth in Autobiography* defines autobiography as “a historical method and at the same time the representation of the self in and through its relations with the outer world” (Pascals 1960:19). Dalit autobiography on the other hand, is an account of a self which is encompassed with a term of being Dalit/Untouchable and community is given more importance than the self (Dangle 1992: 237).

M.S. S Pandian in 'Writing Other Lives' (2008) critically looks at the social sciences and their limitations, and makes a positive point about the Dalit autobiographies. He argues that the theory and abstraction is not innocent of power, social sciences are constrained by their ground rules in producing morally and politically enabling knowledge in which narratives need not be seen as a “compensation for the theoretical deficiency of Dalits but could very well be a compensation for the deficiencies of dominant modes of theory-making in social sciences”. He says that though the narrative forms of Dalits are “not bound by the evidentiary rules of social science, the privileged notion of teleological time, and claims to objectivity and authorial neutrality” but they can still “produce enabling redescrptions of life-worlds and facilitate the re-imagination of the political”. Arguing on the above he analyzes Karukku by Bama (1992) and Vadu by K.A Gunasekharan (1995), both autobiographies by Dalits. These texts in his analysis draw attention to “self-conscious ordinariness” of the lives narrated. They bring into focus those lives that will be treated as unworthy and trivial by the evidentiary practices of social sciences. They do not signify, so to speak, anything more than their ordinariness. He says that the act of naming and writing out things, events and lives as trivial is an act of power in the practice of social sciences. By “erasing specificities of places and events and masking them with a veil of anonymity”, these narratives give the text a depth of ordinariness. And such a veil of anonymity “frees events, persons, and places of their claim to distinctiveness and renders them commonplace. They can be anywhere and anytime”. Once again, time gets marked here as if it is unchanging. In these texts/narratives the 'events do not follow a linear time grid' and 'unfold as a montage of fragments going back and forth in time'. He says by this it produces:

a depletion of the pastness of the events and glosses them with a significant degree of contemporariness - as if time repeats itself instead of progressively moving on. Thus a past folds into the present and the time that matters is the ever-persistent now (Pandian 2008: 36-37).

He argues that the teleological time of theory which is the central preoccupation of the social sciences can't achieve this all-pervasive presentness which comes out of Dalit self-writing in the form of autobiography,

Charu Gupta in her article 'Embodying Resistance: Representing Dalits in Colonial India' (2015) argues that the constructions of Dalits were mostly stereotypical and supported dominant modes of ideology, characterized by condemnation, romanticisation of victimhood. She paraphrases Jacques Ranciere's words and says representations are 'embodied allegories of inequality'. She also expresses this problem by quoting Gayatri Spivak: 'a basic technique of representing the subaltern as such is as the object of the gaze from above' (Gupta 2015: 101). Gupta argues that representation by Dalit-self writings (autobiographies) provides intimate sites/spaces where counter-images emerge and these internal images "challenges dominant visions" and 'carve out contingent, varied and flexible modes of resistance' (Gupta 2015: 101)

In his essay 'Consciousness, Agency and Humiliation; Reflection on Dalit Life-Writing and Subalternity' (2013) Udaya Kumar talks particularly about the Dalit self writing, i.e Dalit autobiographies. In it he tries to understand alternative modes of articulating the historicity of subaltern experience and the role Dalit life-writing particularly. The main argument in the essay is that Dalit autobiographies are more about the 'authenticity of experience' and they are related to 'paradigmatic' status in Dalit literary production. Dalit autobiographies, he argues, reflect diversity in generic forms and the organization of voices in various texts. It is an "alternative mode of articulating the historicity of subaltern experience". He says that it is more than reportage and has less to do with empirical matter or quantitative preponderance. He sees the importance of these Dalit writings in terms of its "logic of publicness and exposure". These autobiographies disclose a "lack of fit in the ways in which subjects inhabit the social domain". This sense makes it a mode of historiography. The forms and idioms in these narratives are "shaped by professional historical writing, through analogy, opposition or adaptation". They also highlight the disciplinary dimension of modernization, by focusing on the alienating experience of institutions such as the school and government offices. When they trace the emergence of the modern Dalit citizen, these autobiographies present a critical space by giving a multifaceted account of the subject's inhabitation of the world.

Sharmila Rege's *Writing Caste/ Writing Gender* puts forth her argument in relation to the Dalit autobiographies in general and Dalit women autobiographies. Though Dalit writing is seen as representing particular themes and not universal themes, it challenges the bourgeois genre of autobiography and pulls at the boundaries of what are considered the parameters of the life world. Rege argues that Dalit life narratives are the most direct and accessible ways to counter the silence and misrepresentation of Dalits.

Kancha Illiah (1996) in his book *Why I'm not a Hindu?* says that narratives of personal experiences are the context that enable us to contrast and compare the social forms and personal experiences. He further argues that the method of examining "socio-cultural and economic history is central to the social sciences; significantly, the method of narrating and deconstructing experiences has been used by feminists" (Illiah 1996: xi-xii). He further argues that writing personal narratives is possible and indeed the most authentic way in which the construction and deconstruction of history can take place.

Conclusion

Most of the literature discussed in this paper comes as a critique of caste in terms of its biased theorization of caste and Dalit writings come as a critique of the mainstream theories of caste and representation of Dalits in politics and also in literature. Dalit self-writing is also seen as an indirect critique to the academic/social sciences. The critique identifies silence, misrepresentation and wrong formulation/theorization of caste and society. It masks rather than explains the structure of the caste system. Though Dalit writing has had a hard time establishing itself in the field of literature because it was blamed for not having aesthetic values and bringing a narrow identity-based approach into literature, it has changed the rules as well as the boundaries of literature in the process. Talking about Dalits or writing about Dalits or their perspective or their experience should not be limited to identity politics/identity. Dalits are the marginalized section of the society at large, and their experience of being a Dalit in Indian society comes from the materiality of the caste system and presents the social reality as it is. Dalit self writing associates the Dalit-in-itself to Dalit-for-itself. Writings about Dalits are also linked to theorization of the caste, village society and modernity. In other words, Dalit autobiographies forge the right to speak, both for and beyond the individual, and contest, explicitly or implicitly, the official forgetting of history of caste oppression, struggles and resistance. From the social sciences to aesthetics almost all forms of discourses, thoroughly defined the Dalits as a changeable unit of social engineering (Nagaraj 2010: 200-201) in those discourses and the politics of knowledge systems they remove culture, which is also a source of power, from the definition of the Dalit's being. Nagaraj points out that due to these exclusionary attempts (to carve out an exclusivist identity for Dalits) of social scientists as 'they could not explain the dominating presence of anti-Dalit structures in the culture of the untouchables'. He further argues that such notions of hegemony and consent by coercion will not help a social scientist build a solid system of belief to create images. There is tension which holds untouchables as a social group in utter contempt and also has an 'uneasy encounter with their metaphysical and mystical worlds at the levels of non-orthodox religious practices' (Nagaraj 2010: 202). which are somehow resolved in favor of upper caste cultural ideology. But he says that Dalit writings in the form of poetry or autobiography allow readers to see for themselves the truth or falsity of such descriptions.

REFERENCES

1. Alder, P.A. and Adler, P. 2008. 'Of Rhetoric and Representation: The Four Faces of Ethnography', *The Sociological Quarterly*, 49(1):1-30.
2. Bama. 1992/2012. *Karukku* (trans. by Lakshmi Holmstrom). Oxford University Press: New Delhi.
3. Bhongle, Rangrao. 2002. 'Dalit Autobiographies: An Unknown Facet of Social Reality', *Indian Literature*, 46(4):158-160.
4. Dangle, Arjun (ed.). 1992. *Poisoned Bread: Translations from Modern Marathi Dalit Literature*. Orient Longman: Hyderabad.
5. Davis, Charlotte Aull. 1999. *Reflexive Ethnography: A guide to Researching selves and the Others*. Routledge: London and New York.
6. Dumont, Louis. 1980. *Homo Hierarchicus: The Caste System and Its Implications*. The University of Chicago Press: Chicago.
7. Gajjarawala, Toral Jatin. 2013. *Untouchable Fictions: Literary Realism and the Crisis of Caste*. Fordham University Press: USA
8. Gough, Kathleen. 1955. 'The social structure of a Tanjore village'. In McKim Marriott *Village India: Studies in the little community*. The University of Chicago Press: Chicago. 36-52.
9. Gupta, Charu. 2015. 'Embodying Resistance: Representing Dalits in Colonial India', *Journal of South Asian Studies*, 38(1): 100-118.
10. Guru, Gopal. and Sarukkai, Sundar. 2012. *The Cracked Mirror: An Indian Debate on Experience and Theory*. Oxford University Press: New Delhi.
11. Guru, Gopal. 2012. 'How Egalitarian Are the Social Sciences in India?'. In Gopal Guru and Sundar Sarukkai *The Cracked Mirror: An Indian Debate on Experience and Theory*. Oxford University Press: New Delhi.
12. Guru, Gopal. 1993. 'Dalit Movement in Mainstream Sociology', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 28(14): 570-573.
13. Hunt, Sarah Beth. 2014. *Hindi Dalit Literature and the Politics of Representation*. Routledge India: New Delhi.
14. Hunt, Sarah Beth. 2007. 'Hindi Dalit Autobiography: An Exploration of Identity', *Modern Asian Studies*, 41(3): 545-574.
15. Judge, P.K (ed.). 2014. *Reading in Indian Sociology: Towards Sociology of Dalits*. Sage Publications: New Delhi, Volume One.
16. Kumar, Udaya. 2013. 'Consciousness, Agency and Humiliation: Reflections on Dalit-life Writing and Subalternity'. In Cosimo Zene *The Political Philosophies of Antonio Gramsci and B.R. Ambedkar: Itineraries of Dalits and Subalterns*. Routledge Publications: New York.
17. Lakshmanan, K. 2004. 'Dalit Masculinities in Social Science Research: Revisiting a Tamil Village', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 39(10):1088-1092.
18. Mohanty, B.B. 2012. *Studies in Indian Sociology: Agrarian Change and Mobilisation*. Sage Publications: New Delhi. Volume three, Series in Studies in Indian Sociology.
19. Motzafi-Haller, Pnina. 1997. 'Writing Birthright: On Native Anthropologists and Politics of Representation'. In Deborah E. Reed-Danahay (ed.) *Auto/Ethnography: Rewriting the Self and the Social*. Oxford Publishers: New York.
20. Nagaraj, D.R (eds). 2010. *The Flaming Feet and Other Essays: A Study of the Dalit Movement in India*, 2nd Edition. Permanent Black: Ranikhet.
21. Oommen, T.K . 2001. 'Understanding the Indian society: The relevance of perspective from below' (Occasional paper series-4). Pune: Department of Sociology, University of Pune.
22. Pandian, M.S.S. 2008. 'Writing Ordinary Lives', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 43(38): 34-40.
23. Pascals, Roy. 1960. *Design and Truth in Autobiography*. Routledge and Kegan Poul: London.
24. Patel, Sujata. (ed.). 2011. *Doing Sociology in India: Genealogies, Locations, and Practices*. Oxford University Press: New Delhi.
25. Rawat, S. Ramnarayan. & Satyanarayana K(eds.). 2016. *Dalit Studies*. Duke University Press: Durham and London.
26. Rege, Sharmila. 2006. *Writing Caste/ Writing Gender: Reading Dalit Women Testimonies*. Zubaan Publishers: New Delhi.
27. Rege, Sharmila. 2001. 'Exercising the Fear of Identity: Interrogating the Language Question in Sociology and Sociological Language'. In Sujata Patel (ed.) *Doing Sociology in India: Genealogies, Locations, and Practices*. Oxford University Press: New Delhi.
28. Satyanarayana, K. and Tharu, Susie (eds.). 2013. *The Expression of Freedom: An Introduction to Dalit Writing*. Navyana Publishers: New Delhi.
29. Satyanarayana, K. 2016. 'The Dalit Reconfiguration of Modernity: Citizens and Castes in Telugu Public Sphere'. In K. Satyanarayana and S Rawat Ramnarayan *Dalit Studies*. Duke University Press: Durham and London.
30. Stanley, Liz. 1993. 'On Autobiography Biography in Sociology' *Sociology*, 27(1): 41-52, Published by: Sage Publications, Ltd.
31. Valmiki, Omprakash. 1998. *Joothan: A Dalit Life* (trans. by Arun Prabha Mukherjee). Samya Publications: Kolkata.